

While individual voices within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are heard criticizing Burma's election laws, the bloc needs to be united in calling for a free and fair poll.

The Burmese regime announced its anticipated election laws last week and will definitely hold its promised election this year.

The election laws confirmed fears that the election won't be free, fair and inclusive, meaning that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) will have more trouble with its miscreant member, military-ruled Burma.

Although Asean withheld comment on Burma's election laws, some member countries have expressed uneasiness.

In Singapore, while government officials remained silent, *The Straits Times* newspaper took a critical stance, saying: "One of the election laws seems aimed specifically at opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. It requires her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), to expel her as she is serving a suspended sentence under house arrest. Without her participation, the vote cannot have much credibility."

The island state's daily said Suu Kyi remains a symbol of resistance and "a political force whose exclusion cannot be justified."

It continued: "Neither can elections be seen as inclusive if the other 2,000 political prisoners are unable to contest the polls. With her and them off the ballot, voters' choice will be drastically limited, if not largely pre-determined. An election commission will have 'final and conclusive' say on all electoral matters, according to the authorities, but its five members have to be approved by the junta. So much for fairness and transparency."

Alberto Romulo, foreign secretary of the Philippines, went further and commented: "Unless they release Suu Kyi and allow her and her party to participate in the elections, it's a complete farce

and therefore contrary to their road map to democracy.”

Romulo had already, before the announcement of the election laws, called on the junta to ensure that the election is “free, fair, credible and all-inclusive.”

Teuku Faizasyah, a spokesman of Indonesia’s foreign ministry, predicted that the laws may undermine the election because its result will not be inclusive.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is scheduled to send his foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa, this month to Burma, where he is expected to speak out for democratic reform there, including an inclusive election.

The election in Burma will again test Asean’s waning influence and the controversial policy of “constructive engagement” in its dealings with Burma.

Senior officials from Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia have also told the Burmese regime that the release of Suu Kyi and other political prisoners is key to winning international credibility and to achieving much-needed national reconciliation. However, there has been no sign that the regime is prepared to heed their advice.

In February, Surin Pitsuwan, Asean’s secretary-general and former foreign minister of Thailand, told the BBC’s “Hardtalk” program that Asean expected a credible and transparent election in Burma, but added that the organization cannot interfere in the details of the poll.

Without mentioning Burma’s dire political situation, the prevailing climate of fear and the country’s 2,000 political prisoners, Surin Pitsuwan spoke as if he were a spokesman of the regime.

“No election is perfect,” he said. “It has to begin. That’s why they [the Burmese regime] are beginning. They promise [to hold an election] at the end of this year.” And he said the Burmese

generals' commitment to the election should be seen as a positive factor.

In the past, Asean support for the Burmese regime was tied to a belief that engagement will change its repressive behavior and bring more openness. Asean leaders also insisted that the organization has to counter China's sphere of influence in Burma.

So far, however, Asean's engagement policy has proven to be ineffective.

Since Burma became a member of Asean in 1997, the regime has incarcerated ever more political prisoners, driven hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority refugees to seek safety in jungle hideouts, in neighboring Thailand and, recently, even in China. It brazenly massacred activists and monks in full view of the world in the September 2007 demonstrations. Today, Burma is a satellite state of China.

More worryingly, Burma has forged closer military ties with North Korea. Reports of purchases of short-range ballistic missiles have been confirmed and there have been persistent reports of nuclear cooperation between the two nations.

Senior US State Department officials have publicly expressed concern about the shady relationship between Burma and North Korea.

So, where does Asean stand now? Unfortunately, not all in the bloc agree that it is important for Burma to move toward a genuine democracy rather than "disciplinary democracy."

Not surprisingly, the governments that have been most silent on the need for a free and fair election—Laos, Cambodia, Brunei and Vietnam—are the ones that share the Burmese junta's penchant for authoritarian rule.

Vietnam, currently chair of Asean, is particularly shaping up as a bulwark against pressure from within Asean and from the outside world.

The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry has said on its Web site that Hanoi supports Burma's regional and international integration. As a member of the UN Security Council in 2008-09, Vietnam maintained that engagement with Naypyidaw should be based on a policy of non-interference in Burma's domestic affairs.

In recent months, Burmese and Vietnamese leaders and senior officials have met repeatedly to strengthen bilateral and regional ties.

Last October, Gen Shwe Mann, the joint chief of staff of the Burmese armed forces, traveled to Hanoi to meet with Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet and sign an agreement on increasing military cooperation.

Two months later, Maung Myint, Burma's minister for religious affairs, also visited Vietnam, where he signed the first bilateral agreement ever reached between Asean members on religious matters.

The visit was followed in January by a meeting between Burmese Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein and Vietnam's deputy ministers of foreign affairs and defense in Naypyidaw. Then, later in the month, Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win attended a ministerial meeting of the Asean Political Security Community, which Vietnam hosted as the Asean chair for 2010.

In view of these developments, there can be no doubt that the Burmese regime leaders are counting on Vietnam.

There is nothing especially untoward in any of this, but as long as Asean remains divided along political lines, there is a very real danger of its less democratic members reinforcing the Burmese junta's stubborn refusal to acknowledge the need for change.



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